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The Openlands Project and volunteers have begun the process to renovate an area on the bluff at Fort Sheridan.

A one-mile trail for walking and biking along the bluff overlooking Lake Michigan is expected to be part of the renovation.

Initial work started Friday with Forest City Military Communities volunteers who cleaned the beach area. Specialized skills also will be needed for other aspects, according to Joyce O'Keefe, Lake Forest resident and deputy director of the Openlands Project in Chicago.

Openlands has taken control of about one-third of a 77-acre donation, including the Bartlett Ravine area, for which they ultimately will be stewards. The land was given to the public by the U.S. Navy in 2004, with the help of U.S. Rep. Mark S. Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, and includes beach, dunes, bluff and ravine complexes which have not been open to public use for more than 100 years. The site includes numerous rare plant and bird species.

This overall \$8 million ecological recovery effort will be directed at plant communities on the lakefront bluffs and in ravine areas, a task that will involve removal of the tree canopy to allow threatened and endangered species a better survival opportunity.

"Our goal is to have a major portion of the restoration (of the entire site) done two years from this fall," O'Keefe said. "We plan to work with the Lake County Forest Preserve District quite a bit. They have done a beautiful job with their restorations."

Other groups O'Keefe expects to work with include Garden Club members from Lake Forest to Evanston, the University of Illinois, foundations, and the Homeowners Association at Fort Sheridan.

O'Keefe said some major improvements will occur this winter when the ground is frozen and

large trees can be removed without damage to the ground surface and its plant communities. Now, she said, Openlands is working with landscape architects at the University of Illinois at the Chicago campus to create a bluff-top trail.

"It will be a magnificent, magnificent trail to walk on because the views of the lake will be so expansive," she said.

Other University of Illinois volunteers will conduct baseline studies and inventories of plant and wildlife species to help guide policy decisions.

"They're wild about it," O'Keefe said. "Their interest is urban ecology."

Interested people or groups can register to help restore the Beach-Ravine-Bluff complex with Sara Barber, project manager for site improvements. She can be reached at sbarber@openlands.org or at (312) 863-6274.

"We're putting together a bank of names of people who want to help us at Fort Sheridan," said O'Keefe. "We're interested to work with birders to prepare inventories (of species)."

They need docents to escort visitors and discuss the work to be done and the species present at the site. Volunteers to help with ground restoration are wanted too.

Barber said employees of Forest City Military Communities, Inc., and landscape architects Clarence Davids & Company, of Lake Villa, brought equipment and enthusiasm to their work on Friday.

"It was hard work," she said. "It was very productive."

Volunteers removed tires, ribbons and balloons, plastic bottles, metal from jetties, and cigarette butts.

"I've never see so many cigarette butts in my life," Barber said.

One plastic Gatorade bottle contained a message, she said, from someone expressing doubts about a relationship with a boyfriend. A five dollar bill was found on the sand.

She said some debris can get tangled with wildlife and become life threatening, which is why it is important to remove beach trash.

About 36 employees of Forest City Military Communities turned-out to help clean the beach. Their work also included graffiti removal, repainting breakwalls and removing debris from the beach itself.